

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019

www.ijellh.com

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The Issue of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: A Study

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* (2003) deals with the Gangulis, an Indian diaspora family with all their inherent dilemmas in a foreign land i.e., America. Among the dilemmas, the most pronounced one is found to be the issue of identity which grips both the first and second generation of the family. The question of identity in the text assumes substantial dimension with its coverage of Ashoke Ganguli's decision to go to the U.S at the age of 23 to pursue Ph.D at MIT, Ashima Bhaduri's marriage to Ashoke, their struggle in America in alien environment, their settlement, their return journeys, difference with their U.S grown offsprings in different matters and their negotiation with all types of uncertainties. All these challenges unsettle them out and out and everytime they are found to be making endeavors to survive there with enthusiasm or exasperation, and in the process a new identity emerges that is dissimilar to their previous one. A postcolonial study with the perspectives of diaspora studies will through further light on it.

Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri's second work and first novel *The Namesake* (2003) by expatriate Indian writer, is of great importance for its focus on the issue of identity of Indian diaspora in the

U.S. Through the Gangulis, the Indian diaspora family in the U.S, Lahiri tries to explore the identity crisis faced by Indian diaspora abroad. The identity issue, as found in the text, finds a magnitude because Lahiri covers the experience of both the first and second generations. While doing so, she locates them in a liminal or “in-between” situation which is characterized by irresolution and indetermination of identity.

Objective of the Paper:

The aim of the paper is to talk about identity crisis of the first generation Indian diaspora in America through the characters of Ashoke and Ashima.

Hypotheses:

First, prior to his departure to the U.S, Ashoke of Alipore, West Bengal, seems to have a solid identity.

Secondly, ethnic identity seems to figure prominently in *The Namesake*.

Thirdly, *The Namesake* is found to be attempting to secure a “common horizon against the crises of national identity.”

Fourthly, the ethnic Indian identity appears to be more pronounced in Ashima.

Methodology:

While carrying out the study the paper takes recourse to postcolonial studies with special reference to diaspora studies.

Discussion:

The notion of identity in *The Namesake* seems to be the representative of what David Richards, following Bhabha and Said, calls “products of a world in constant motion”.

(Blackwell, 19). The identity of the Gangulis is not rooted or fixed in essential categories like nation, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or gender or other striking differences; instead it is “in a constant state of flux” (Blackwell, 19). This fluid identity of the Gangulis stems from “a process of constant interaction and change shaped by historical circumstance” that is their diasporic condition. The historical circumstance of diasporic life is characterized by liminality or “in-betweenness” that subverts and unfixes the previous “solid” identity that essentializes the ideas of “impermeable entities, such as the nation, culture, and selfhood,” and invariably tries to reconstruct identity by anchoring “the debate around hybrid and porous formations, such as displacement, dislocation, and migrancy.” (Blackwell, 19). This is exactly what Lahiri does in creating an unfixed, unsettled, shifting, mutable, and hybrid identity for the diasporic people in *The Namesake*.

Prior to his departure to the U.S, Ashoke of Alipore, West Bengal, seems to have a solid identity. His meeting with Ghosh, a Bengali businessman of Tollygunge, who comes from England after two years, reveals the former’s insular life and thereby underlining his solid identity. Ghosh is a person who travels a lot asks him whether he has visited any other country. Ashoke’s reply to his question discloses his limited experience of visiting outside of Calcutta that includes Delhi and Jamshedpur only. Lack of exposure, residing in one of the backward places of Bengal, i.e., Alipore, strong burden of family being the eldest of six siblings of old parents, all debar from him exploring possibilities outside the country. It gives him fixity of identity that is devoid of broader outlook, and ridden by provincial consideration. It is only after his meeting with the widely visited Ghosh who opens his eyes beyond Calcutta and India. Ghosh, indeed shakes off his parochialism, and drives him towards unfixing his inherent solid identity by putting him some question:

“Seen much of this world?”

“Not this world,”

“England. America,”

“Have considered going there?” (Lahiri, 15)

Having known Ashoke’s inhibition and parochial attitude Ashoke asks him to ward off his speculation and see the world:

“You are still young. Free,” ... “Do yourself a favor. Before it’s too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a willow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late.” (Lahiri, 16)

He even gives him his address and assures him of further help. This conversation with Ghosh instills him profound confidence and shakes his sensibility to the core. Ghosh words “young” and “Free”, indeed, drive him to desolidify his parochial identity towards fluidity as seen:

Ashoke began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died. The following year, with the aid of a cane, he returned to college and graduated, and without telling his parents he applied to continue his engineering studies abroad. Only after he’d been accepted with a full fellowship, a newly issued passport in hand, did he inform them of his plans.”

(Lahiri, 20)

His decision to fly to the U.S, indeed, reflects his embracing of American dream of success, and that dream becomes successful in his pursuit and completion of PhD in fibre optics in MIT, and then getting appointed in Boston University as assistant professor. This academic and professional excellence aside, he also owns a house in Pemberton Road, rears his family there, befriends people of that country; necessarily construct his diasporic identity which unfixes his previous provinciality and stereotype.

Ethnic identity seems to figure prominently in *The Namesake*. From the very beginning of the text, it is seen that ethnicity characterizes the Indian diaspora's existence in America. This ethnic identity is noticed in their everyday experience, in terms of their food, lifestyle and approach to life, notwithstanding their negotiation with the cosmopolitan trend.

The Namesake is found to be attempting to secure a "common horizon against the crises of national identity." (Song, 347). This common horizon calls for a middle ground for the resolution of differences that surface in maintaining one's identity in a foreign land. The characters in the novel experience the crisis of getting assimilated into the foreign culture or maintaining adherence to pluralism. *The Namesake* shows the inherent difficulty in resolution of the crisis, and thereby making the identity politics of the Indian diaspora more problematic. Indeed, the text is not interested in the resolution as stated by Song, "*The Namesake* dramatizes the difficulty of allowing its characters to be fully penetrated by a moment of multiple and converging crises that offer no magical routes toward resolution, a moment that may, in fact, present itself as not interested in any resolution of any kind." (Song, 347)

This national identity of the Indian Americans is defined by their ethnic elements viz., nation, nationality, language, ancestry, culture and other distinguishing markers. The spirit of maintaining national identity is very much in the first generation of migrant Indians as in the case of Ashoke and Ashima. After getting admitted into the PhD course of the MIT and sensing a bright future in America, Ashoke wishes to maintain his connection with the mainland and its culture by marrying a Bengali girl Ashima. Ashima's menu for Ashoke, indeed, representative of Indian food:

In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please, with unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice, and salt she had written about to her mother in her first letter home. By now she had learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his

favourite thing about lamb curry is potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal.

(Lahiri, 10)

The ethnic Indian identity appears to be more pronounced in Ashima. Before getting married to Ashoke Ganguly, Asima Bhaduri, was an English major student in Calcutta. She falls in the category of those Indian girls who come to the U.S not in pursuit of higher education or lucrative careers, but for marriage. Ashima tries to maintain many tradition of India as in the case of not uttering the name of Ashoke in front of others.

It is because of this ethnic tradition Ashima does not like Maxine, her son Gogol's girl friend, when Maxine addresses Gogol's parents by their name. Despite her polite treatment to Maxine when the latter accompanied Gogol to their home, Ashima does not consider her fit to be her daughter in law for "She'd been startled that Maxine had addressed her as Ashima, and her husband as Ashoke." (Lahiri, 166)

The ethnic identity of Ashima seems to be reinforced by a very powerful metaphor of food at the very beginning of the novel. The food reflects Ashima's strong longing for India and her utter displeasure for the foreign things. She finds it extremely difficult to get well along with the American weather condition and is completely perturbed by her cultural displacement.

Ashima's attempt for "a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalk" and "concoction"(Lahiri, 1) reflects her displacement and initiation into a hybrid identity. Lynn rightly observes: "Thus from the start, the universal cravings of pregnancy, are imprinted as well with issues of identity – our tastes, our yearnings, define us. Ashima is satisfying her longing for India with this strange hybrid of American cereal and chilies. Ashima and Ashoke will spend the rest of their lives making these kinds of accommodations. They will be strangers in a strange, if welcoming, land. Their son will be

thoroughly American, all the more so in that he struggles with the burden of another culture carried by his parents.” (Lynn, 162)

The Indian diaspora identity of Ashima appears to be more obvious when she is at her labour in hospital. At this time she feels very lonely given the fact that she is not attended by any loved ones as in the case of India. Her looming loneliness and helplessness at the time of getting motherhood in a foreign country is evident even after her admission into the Mount Auburn Hospital under the supervision of the obstetrician Dr. Ashley when he checks her and finds “No need to worry,” and “Everything is looking perfectly normal.” :

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It’s not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land.

(Lahiri, 6)

Ashima’s fear in her diasporic subject position also deepens by her concern of life for her children in America. In spite of the complete absence of her near and dear ones she is able to deliver the baby like any other women like her mother and grandmother. But there is a constant fear of alienation waiting for her baby like the alienation she is now experiencing; and this fear makes her stay in the U.S very miserable and full of anxieties:

That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.

(Lahiri, 6)

Ashima’s fear of the future of her baby in America, a foreign land, is actually a dwelling upon second generation ethnic Indian’s further alienation than that of the first one.

After the birth, the baby is visited by three Bengali people viz., the Nandis-Maya and Dilip; and Dr. Gupta apart from Ashoke, his father. The Nandis and Dr. Dilip are mere acquaintances, there was nobody from his own family and the likes of grandparents, uncle, aunt, cousins, and other close relatives are all missing from the picture. It underlines Indian immigrant children's alienated and displaced identity from their birth:

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived.

(Lahiri, 25)

Under such trying circumstances Ashima finds her ethnic identity in tatters like the "tattered" copy of the Bengali magazine *Desh* that she carried to Boston from Calcutta. She has read the magazine over a dozen times, with all the poems, short stories and articles enshrined in it. *Desh*, is not merely a Bengali magazine, but, is her own country, with its geography, people, language and country that defines her ethnic identity which is at crossroads in Boston. The tattered copy of the magazine is "a perpetual comfort to her" (Lahiri, 6) in a foreign country "surrounded by strangers" (Lahiri, 3), and "There is nothing to comfort her" (Lahiri, 4)

It is because of this strong ethnic identity that she finds it extremely difficult to get well along with the American way of life; she gets apprehensive about the future of her son, and hence wishes to come back to India. She tells Ashoke, "I won't", and starts insisting, "Not here. Not like this." She asks him to finish his degree as early as possible and leave the country and emphasizes, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back." (Lahiri, 33)

Ahima's desire for return to India stems from her tremendous struggle of being a first generation immigrant trying to cope up with each of the lack in America which would

have been otherwise in case of India. Her discovery of lack needed assistance right after the delivery from someone close to her deepens her sense of loneliness and fills her with consternation and anger.

Things would have certainly been different in India as after delivery she would have been surrounded by her relatives, and many works relating to the care of the mother and the baby would have been taken care of either by her mother, family members, relatives or servants. But lack of these support and warmth of company makes her life in America terrible. Even Ashoke notices this woeful plight of Ashima. He notices that Ashima is getting leaner, and “her life as his wife at Cambridge, as his wife, has already taken a toll” (Lahiri, 33). Having observed such condition of his wife when Ashoke visits more than once a day from university, he finds her “morose, in bed, rereading her parents’ letters.” (Lahiri, 33). His finding of her sobbing in early morning impels him to think that “it is his fault, for marrying her, for bringing her here.” (Lahiri, 33). He suddenly finds his diasporic subject position untenable, and thought of going back plays in his mind. At this time, Ashima is totally devastated in her diasporic subject position, and her condition unnerves Ashoke in such a way that his subjectivity is torn apart by the thought of pursuing bright academic and lavish professional career in America on the one hand, and the thought of returning to India for the sake of his wife, son, and in greater sense his family and ethnicity. His identity crisis reminds him of Mr. Ghosh, the person, who inspired him to go abroad to define a identity, prior to his death in the train accident. Ashoke also recalls that it was for his wife who “was inconsolably miserable abroad” (Lahiri, 15) Mr. Ghosh returned to India from England about which he spoke with great reverence. Mr. Ghosh stayed two years in England doing a job in voucher, and returned to India for his wife’s sake, but later he repented the decision of coming back as a big mistake “It is my greatest regret, coming back,”. (Lahiri, 15) This reminiscence of the regretful experience of a successful compatriot, who compromised with

his career abroad for his wife's sake and meeting a fateful death back home, makes him more resilient to bear with the troubles associated with his diasporic subjectivity. It is for this forwardlooking approach to life that the text develops Ramlal Agarwal says, "Lahiri's *The Namesake* moves toward future." (Agarwal, 94).

The angst of Ashima's foreignness in her identity in America appears rightfully compared to her pregnancy. Song observes, "The fact that Ashima is both pregnant and a foreigner enables her, according to the novel, to see the paradox of her situation more clearly than others, to imagine at once the range of meanings her pregnancy can represent and what it cannot ultimately guarantee." (Song, 350).

The thought of pregnancy comes to her mind again when she has to move, as mentioned above, from one place to another, within the U.S. After Ashoke's appointment as assistant professor at Boston university, the Gangulis have to move from Cambridge to a university town that lies outside of Boston. The university town is a suburb area, and Ashima does not like owing to the lack of basic amenities sidewalks, streetlights, public transportation, stores etc. She finds "migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been." (Lahiri, 40). Herein she associates troubles of pregnancy with her foreigner's identity: "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts." (Lahiri, 50)

Ashima's split identity seems to surface in the Boston suburb when she does something which is not expected of a university professor's wife in India. She has very little exposure there, and When Ashoke is at the university, her outings from the apartment "are limited to the university within which they live, and to the historic district that flanks the campus on one edge." (Lahiri, 50). Apart from her daily mundane works, she "makes thirty samosas to sell at the international coffeehouse, for twenty-five cents each," (Lahiri, 50). It

simply reflects her level of displacement, and its resultant crises marked by directionlessness. Ashima Bhaduri in Calcutta; before becoming Asima Ganguli, and migrating to the U.S, was an English major student, and used to tutor at home:

Her samosa-seelling in the U.S, that too, within the campus of Boston University, where her husband is a professor, exhibits her serious and massive displacement, and radical transformation which ruptures her very identity, and so to speak, her very self. This severe crisis in identity suggests “the death of the self” (Joshi, 84) symptomatic of intense disillusionment, frustration, restlessness, alienation and helplessness. In this regard, her character reminiscences Mrs. Sen, the wife of another Bengali professor in the U.S, who does babysitting, in “Mrs. Sen” in Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Initially, the fellow Bengalis in America and the return journeys to Bengal also seem to help maintain the ethnic identity of the Gangulis. But as time passes, the Gangulis find it rather hard to maintain that identity due to “insupportable knowledge” (Punter, 162). This crisis is more pronounced in the first generation when they find that they are joined by new Bengali migrants with a generation gap, along with the news of their near and dear ones in their country of origin making their fragmentation unbridgeable. Earlier the fellow compatriots in New England are so close to Ashoke and Ashima that they knew their pet names i.e., Monu and Mithu respectively. But the number of such people starts dwindling, and the news of the deaths of their relatives including their parent’s makes their connection with roots fragile:

Within a decade abroad, they are both orphaned; Ashoke’s parents both dead from cancer, Ashima’s mother from kidney disease. Gogol and Sonia are woken by these deaths in the early mornings, their parents screaming on the other side of thin bedroom walls. News of death aside, news of weddings and births in the home country also “send chills down their spines.” (Lahiri, 64). They are now poised in such a situation where neither can they

really relate to the deaths nor can they celebrate new births or weddings. For, their identity is now like stranger both in the home and host country. They are stranger in their home country because the new faces that they come across are not known to them; stranger in the host country because they are to get accustomed to everything new, and they are not visited by their relatives from Bengal.

This strangeness of identity and fragmentation of family define the diasporic existence of the Gangulis marked by insupportable knowledge on either side of the globe in the flux of time:

A knowledge, one might say, that is forever under pressure; one that is forced through the coils of self-consciousness, certainly, but whose processes must always be intertwined with disavowal, with an abiding incredulity about the extent to which the 'self' must remain 'not known' – not known by the outside world, of course, but also in the end not known even on the inner screen, forever screened out in order to survive.

(Punter, 162)

The diasporic identity of the Gangulis, marked by their complete liminality, comes to the fore when they make their visit to India. The return journeys through a flood of light on the level of displacement at all levels viz., language, food, habits, education, health and sanitation and the like, which in broader sense define their ethnic identity, and that is now in crisis. The displacement is more conspicuous in the second generation. Lahiri has very nicely shown them when they visit India for a long period of eight months just to highlight their dislocated and unsettled subject positions. This eight months visit of the Gangulis to Calcutta was occasioned by Ashoke's sabbatical, and it triggers dissimilar and contradictory reaction between the parents and children:

The opposite subject positions of the first and second generation of the Gangulis in their return journey are seen in terms of their reaction to their relatives, food,

language and culture. It appeared that unlike the first generation's easiness with their ethnic identity and comfort in home culture, the second generation's maintenance of distance from it shows their rootlessness that characterize their cosmopolitan identity.

The character of Ashima seems to assume great importance in having a liminal identity because in the entire novel, she is torn apart in the tug between the home country and the host country. This is particularly noticed when she decides to spend six months in India and six months in the U.S after living thirty- three years in the U.S, that too, after performing her role well as wife and mother, doing well a part-time job at a public library, and after the death of her husband, and after her children fully grown up capable of taking decision of their own life, "To the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere." (Lahiri, 276)

Findings: First, identity crisis of Indian diaspora is the reality of their liminal existence abroad. They particularly find it hard to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity given the pervasiveness of assimilation process of the host country.

Secondly, Ashima, like other women of diasporic literature, is projected as the carrier of ethnic and cultural identity abroad, as these women often go from India to join their working husband there.

Thirdly, quest for cosmopolitanism is the necessary corollary of the globalizing world in which migration is has become a new order of the world.

Conclusion:

The Namesake postulates the identity crisis of Indian diaspora with all nuances covering the plights and experiences of both the first and second generation. The tug of cultural and ethnic identity on the one hand, and the American identity on the other, situates them in a

liminal subject position which deepens their identity crisis. The emerging option for the negotiation of liminality is accepting cosmopolitanism as a reality of today's world.

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